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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: TWO FRONTS IN "THE WAR OF IDEAS"

REF: (A) JAKARTA 2048, (B) SECSTATE 114917

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: Embassy Kazakhstan is facing a "War of Ideas" on two separate fronts. As a Muslim-majority country, Kazakhstan is susceptible to religious extremism from its neighbors to the south. As a former Soviet and largely Russian-speaking nation, Kazakhstan receives much of its news and forms its public opinion of the outside world, and especially the United States, through Russian media, especially television. Public diplomacy tools to counter the Russian-dominated media have largely been decimated over the years. We should consider paying new attention to this "second front of the War of Ideas." END SUMMARY.

13. (SBU) The United States faces a two-front public diplomacy challenge in Kazakhstan, yet a current U.S. government poll asking average Kazakhstanis their opinion of other nations shows that a respectable 64 percent of the population views the United States either very or somewhat favorably. This number is down from 2002 (73 percent). Still, the United States has a solid base to work from in promoting its policy and values to a Kazakhstani audience. To use our political capital, however, we must create the right tools to engage in the "War of Ideas" in two very different areas - potential extremism in the south and Russian media and disinformation from the north.

POTENTIAL EXTREMISM IN SOUTHERN KAZAKHSTAN

14. (SBU) Kazakhstan is a slightly-Muslim-majority country (Sunni), but still mainly secular due to its Soviet heritage. The government openly preaches religious and ethnic tolerance, often touting its support for the small Kazakhstani Jewish community, for example; but like other governments in Central Asia, it keeps a tight rein on religious groups, in part because of the legacy of post-Soviet Afghanistan.

15. (SBU) Outside of its former capital, Almaty, southern Kazakhstan is among the country's most economically depressed areas and is composed of regional centers Shymkent (population 2.5 million), Taraz (population 700,000), and Kyzylorda (population 600,000). The region has high rates of poverty and unemployment, a comparatively young and poorly educated population, high teen crime rates and drug addiction, and rampant corruption among municipal and law-enforcement officials. The major population centers of southern Kazakhstan, like Almaty and Shymkent, are more heavily Muslim and ethnic Kazakh than the rest of the country and are, therefore, more

vulnerable to the spread of extremist ideology. These factors, plus the region's proximity to the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, create an area ripe for extremist recruitment.

¶6. (SBU) Groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Jihad Union, and the Hizb ut-Tahrir are known to operate in this region, and their activities have already spilled into southern Kazakhstan. In late December 2007, 30 Kazakhstani members of Hizb ut-Tahrir were convicted of recruiting and promoting terrorist ideology within Kazakhstan. All those convicted were between the ages of 25 and 30 and were born in Shymkent.

EFFECTIVE PD TOOLS AMID NEW TRADITIONS

¶7. (SBU) Mission Kazakhstan has made it a priority to reach out to Kazakhstani Muslims, many of whom have only recently re-embraced a faith that was discouraged during 70 years of Soviet domination, and these programs have demonstrated positive results. For example, using Department Youth Enrichment Program funds, the Embassy sponsored a summer-long camp near Taraz for 180 disadvantaged Muslim youngsters. The program fostered leadership, confidence, and independent thinking, and post augmented the camp using the Sports Envoy Program. Olympic basketball stars Sam Perkins and Becky Bonner visited the remote, Soviet-era Pioneer camp to run basketball clinics with the assistance of Peace Corps volunteers. Many of the young Kazakhstanis had never met someone from outside the region, or played basketball for that matter. Their reaction to the extremely tall envoys was a startling and tears-inducing welcome, with some 100 loudly cheering and clapping children lining each side of a path on which the Olympians walked into the camp.

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¶8. (SBU) Embassy Astana has also worked closely with the imam at the National Mosque in Astana, bringing distinguished visitors to meet him and tour his impressive mosque, the largest in Central Asia, of which he is justifiably proud. The DCM hosted him and some of his madrassa students at an iftaar dinner in September, also attended by the Ambassador. The imam was floored to learn of the extent to which Islam is practiced in America, and he noted that the U.S. Embassy was the only foreign mission to reach out to the madrassa to host an iftaar.

¶9. (SBU) USAID's Muslim outreach includes its Community Connections Program, which sent a group of clerics on a "Religion in Secular Society" program. One of its alumni, Nurmukhamed Akhmediyanov, an imam from the Abai city mosque, has since founded a new NGO called Zhas Urpak, or "Young Generation" in Kazakh. Zhas Urpak, which supports at-risk youth in Abai, is the first local NGO founded and led by a religious leader in Kazakhstan.

¶10. (SBU) USAID's Internews satellite television program provides grants to local media outlets that produce Islam-focused programs, which are uploaded to the satellite for downloading at local stations in the region. Programming by the production group Sairam-Akashami in Aksykent includes three programs in Kazakh and Uzbek highlighting the peaceful coexistence of various religious groups.

¶11. (SBU) Re-emerging Islam in post-Soviet Kazakhstan is a fascinating mlange of cultures and heritages. At a Kazakhstan wedding or funeral, it is not unusual to see an imam, who has just led the party in a solemn moment of Arabic prayer, swiftly raise his head and offer an appropriate vodka toast in a blend of Russian and Kazakh. The government and community are still trying to find the perfect mix for this cocktail of traditions. The government is providing a narrative of tolerance, yet there is still potential for extremists to gain a foothold. The United States has an excellent opportunity to work as a partner with the government to promote a form of Islam that embraces tolerance.

THE SECOND FRONT

¶12. (SBU) While the front in the "War of Ideas" continues to play out along the southern border of Kazakhstan, a second and,

unfortunately, familiar one has opened from the north. Central Asians get their news and information -- and form worldviews -- predominantly through Russian-language mass media, including newspapers, television (90 percent of the population watches Russian television), and web sites.

¶13. (SBU) Undersecretary Glassman noted that during the Cold War, the United States "became good at public diplomacy," but in the 1990s, it began a "process of unilateral disarmament in the weapons of advocacy," which is certainly evident in Central Asia. Since at least 2004, Russia has sought to undermine progress toward democracy with barely-counteracted, neo-Soviet disinformation, including characterizations of so-called "color revolutions" that equate democratic change with instability and castigate those who work for it as traitors. There is no major Russian-language, neutral, news-oriented commercial TV other than Euronews dubbed into Russian.

¶14. (SBU) Russian-media inspired messages are widespread, such as the notion that the United States wants a weak Russia and is working to surround it to bring it to its knees, and that the United States military is actually promoting narcotics exports from Afghanistan to the north. Leaders across the region will less likely have to face hard questions about their own policies as long as they have American windmills to tilt at.

A PD APPARATUS UNPREPARED FOR CURRENT CHALLENGES

¶15. (SBU) The process of "unilateral disarmament" described by U/S Glassman left the PD cupboard without some key resources, and the much-needed replenishments that have arrived during the past few years are designed more for the southern front than the northern one. The resources that Washington has made available for the Youth Enrichment Program, for example, led to a resoundingly successful camp experience for nearly 200 children who will remember it for the

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rest of their lives. But a smaller and less substantive Russian-language Washington File and the lack of Russian-language translation services make it difficult to counter the disinformation Kazakhstanis absorb on a daily basis. Even a rejuvenated, objective, Cold War-era "Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty" would find it a challenge to hold its own in this Russian-dominated media environment, but today's RFE/RL is so strangled for resources it has drifted from content to comment, its website and Kazakh-language Radio Azzytyk becoming perceived by governments in the region as "Radio Oppo." Using freelancers who often provoke more than enlighten, RFE/RL at times is barely distinguishable from some of the more strident opposition media outlets.

¶16. (SBU) The distancing of the Broadcasting Board of Governors and the Voice of America (VOA) from the traditional public diplomacy context after USIA's 1999 consolidation with the State Department has created a serious information deficit in the region that must be re-bridged, especially in an age of electronic journalism, when radio has emerged, to the surprise of many, as a vibrant communicator. Although USAID funds the Internews satellite TV project, it is not designed to project U.S. policy and values, as RFE/RL once did.

¶17. (SBU) Incredibly, VOA, suffering severe budget cutbacks, no longer broadcasts in Russian, except through internet streaming. Even more incredible, VOA's Russian-language broadcasts were killed shortly before Russia's incursion into Georgia. Now, all that is left of VOA on radio is in English. And although RFE/RL's Kazakh-language Radio Azzytyk is a strong presence in Kazakhstan and breaks some very important stories, we need to consider whether its move away from traditional journalistic objectivity serves U.S. interests.

¶18. (SBU) COMMENT: The United States needs its full arsenal of Russian-language tools updated and expanded. Our ability to get out a lot of information in the appropriate languages as quickly as possible is critical. A reinvigorated Russian-language Washington File that would add, at a minimum, many more transcripts, would be a huge help, especially considering foreign interest in the new U.S.

presidential administration. In the field, we need to start communicating with VOA, giving input on programming and determining how best to use its materials, and we need Washington to facilitate these contacts and restore Russian-language broadcasting. Right now, the only real VOA contact we have is a technician who comes around once every few years to check our satellite dish. END COMMENT.

TWO THINGS THAT CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE NOW

¶19. (SBU) There are two tools the Department can deliver right away that could make a huge difference: first, a 21st century Internet system with high bandwidth. More bandwidth provides more opportunities for streaming video, doing web casts, and disseminating Department content more widely. It also requires money.

¶20. (SBU) The second tool is the English language itself. It is something we have and the rest of the world wants. In Kazakhstan, President Nazarbayev has declared English a third priority language, after Kazakh and Russian. We need more and still more funding for English-language programs. Not only would English-language programs bring people into our Information Resource Centers and American Corners, where they would be exposed to more American materials and ideas, but it would also create educated viewers who could flip the channel from Russian Channel One to CNN or BBC to see the West more objectively.

¶21. COMMENT: We must have tools that demonstrate we are as passionate about democracy's marketplace of ideas as extremists are devoted to its destruction and Russian media addicted to skewing the debate. In counteracting disinformation, perhaps we should reexamine whether it is really helpful to characterize an open and spirited exchange of ideas as any kind of "war" at all, while we get on with breathing life into more programs that can change minds. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND